

VZCZCXRO0299
RR RUEHBC RUEHDBU RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHLH RUEHMOS RUEHPA RUEHPW
DE RUEHJL #0343/01 1490949
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 290949Z MAY 06
FM AMEMBASSY BANJUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 6704
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE
RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORP

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANJUL 000343

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/26/2016
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PHUM](#) [KISL](#) [KDEM](#) [GA](#)
SUBJECT: THE GAMBIA: DISCUSSIONS WITH ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS
FIGURES

REF: A. BANJUL 303

[1](#)B. BANJUL 297 AND PREVIOUS (NOTAL)

BANJUL 00000343 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOSEPH STAFFORD, REASON 1.4 (B AND D)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) In separate meetings with Ambassador, two prominent Islamic clerics indicated that a priority of The Gambia's Islamic religious establishment was to prevent radical, foreign Islamic elements from establishing a foothold here through brainwashing of the country's youth. The pair stressed their commitment to upholding religious freedom and inter-faith harmony, as reflected in the social integration of the Bahai community. One interlocutor, Imam Al-Haji Banding Drammeh, Supreme Islamic Council head, portrayed the Islamic religious establishment's relationship with the GOTG as harmonious. However, the other, Imam Tafsir Gaye, asserted that The Gambia's Islamic clerics lacked "effective channels" for consultation with the government. Both portrayed The Gambia as stable following the aborted coup plot in March, but Drammeh evinced little knowledge or concern over authorities' subsequent abuses, while Gaye indicated that he was deeply concerned but that he and like-minded clerics lacked ways of approaching the GOTG on this score. Ambassador urged the pair to find ways of conveying concern over the abuses to the GOTG. END SUMMARY.

OVERVIEW

[1](#)2. (C) As part of Embassy's outreach to Islamic religious figures, Ambassador recently met separately with two leading Gambian Islamic clerics, Imam Al-Haji Banding Drammeh, chairman of the country's non-governmental advisory body on Islamic issues, the Supreme Islamic Council (SIC) and Imam Tafsir Gaye, head of a large mosque in the Gambian capital. Both men were educated at Cairo's Al-Azhar University, and Ambassador's conversation with Gaye was in Arabic, as the latter's knowledge of English was limited. As with Ambassador's previous conversation with another prominent Islamic cleric, Imam Baba Leigh (ref a), principal conversation topics included the danger of radical Islamic influence in The Gambia, relations between the Islamic religious leadership and the GOTG, and The country's domestic scene following the March 21 aborted coup plot here (ref b).

CONCERN OVER POTENTIAL EXTREMIST FOOTHOLD

[1](#)3. (C) Both Drammeh and Gaye stated that a priority of The

Gambia's Islamic religious establishment was to prevent radical Islamic elements from establishing a foothold here. They asserted that while Gambian Islamic clerics had little sympathy for radical Islamic views, some foreign counterparts (e.g., from Gulf Arab states, Pakistan) were another matter. Our two interlocutors expressed worry that, over time, foreign clerics operating in local mosques and Qoranic schools ("madrasas") might succeed in instilling an extremist orientation in impressionable Gambian youth. They stressed the need for the country's Islamic religious establishment and the GOTG to be more vigilant in monitoring the activities of foreign clerics and the content of their sermons and school lectures. The pair also agreed that Gambian clerics needed to be more active in propagating orthodox, apolitical Islamic doctrines among the country's youth. (COMMENT: Septel report of possible pro-Al-Qaida sentiment in rural Gambia -- as reflected in murals depicting the 9/11 terrorist attacks -- suggests that the Gambians' concern over a possible Islamic extremist foothold being established here is well placed. END COMMENT.)

COMMITMENT TO RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND INTER-FAITH HARMONY

14. (C) The pair stressed what they described as their commitment and that of The Gambia's overwhelming (95 percent) Muslim majority to upholding freedom of religion and inter-faith harmony in the country. They noted that the harmony extended not only to the Muslim and tiny Christian and animist communities, but also to adherents of other faiths seen as heretical by some Muslims elsewhere, Bahais, in particular. They emphasized the full integration of the largely expatriate (e.g., Iranian) Bahai community into Gambian society. (COMMENT: Indicative of this integration, a recent "graduation" ceremony at a local Bahai-run vocational training center received prominent coverage on national television. END COMMENT)

BANJUL 00000343 002.2 OF 003

SIC'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE GOVERNMENT

15. (C) SIC head Drammeh portrayed the relationship between the Council and the Gambian Islamic religious establishment generally, on the one hand, and the GOTG, on the other, as harmonious. He claimed that the government's point-person on Islamic religious issues, the Minister of Religious Affairs (who also holds the Youth and Sports portfolio) was readily accessible to the SIC. According to Drammeh, the government provided no direct subsidy to the SIC, but did occasionally cover the travel costs for SIC members to attend Islamic religious conferences abroad. Revealing a firmly pro-government outlook, he stated that SIC members sometimes accompanied President Jammeh and other senior officials on "meet the people" trips into the country's interior to demonstrate loyalty to the GOTG leadership.

A DIVERGENT VIEW

16. (C) Imam Tafsir Gaye was less upbeat in his assessment of Islamic clerics' relationship with the GOTG, claiming that the two sides lacked "effective channels" for consultation. Asked about the SIC, Gaye responded with a rhetorical question: "does anyone think the Council is an effective channel?" While unwilling to criticize SIC head Drammeh directly, Gaye left the clear impression that he viewed him as an ineffectual spokesman for the Islamic religious community vis-a-vis the GOTG leadership.

DOMESTIC SITUATION FOLLOWING THE FAILED COUP PLOT

¶7. (C) The divergent views of the two clerics were also evident in the discussion of The Gambia's internal situation following the coup plot thwarted in March. While both agreed that the stability of the GOTG and the country generally remained intact following the incident and expected it to remain so, Drammeh professed little knowledge or concern over the ensuing deterioration in the human rights situation here. He repeatedly condemned the failed plot, asserting that he had "no real knowledge" of torture of detainees or other abuses and expressing confidence that the accused would receive a fair trial.

¶8. (C) Gaye, by contrast, indicated that he regarded the reports of detainee abuse as based on fact and that he was deeply concerned. He also expressed worry over the GOTG's move against the private media in closing the journal, "Independent" and detaining its personnel. However, Gaye demurred when asked whether he and other like-minded clerics would approach the GOTG to raise their concern over the abuses, repeating his earlier point that there were no "effective channels" for doing so. He ruled out acting on his own and going public over the deteriorating human rights situation, suggesting that to do so would only invite retribution from authorities.

¶9. (C) Ambassador emphasized to both clerics our concern over the GOTG's backsliding on human rights, as highlighted by the reports of mistreatment of detainees and urged that The Gambia's Islamic religious establishment look for ways to register concern to the GOTG.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) SIC head Drammeh is known for his conservative stance on social issues, as exemplified by his failure heretofore to express opposition to FGM, unlike less tradition-bound clerics such as Gaye and Baba Leigh. Drammeh also came across in the conversation as the sort of pro-government stalwart that the GOTG leadership could rely on to prevent the SIC or the Islamic religious establishment generally from voicing public criticism over the backsliding of late on human rights. As for our other interlocutor, Gaye, like Baba Leigh, indicated his frustration at the lack of "channels" for concerned clerics such as he to convey that concern -- privately -- to the GOTG. On a more positive note, Drammeh, like Gaye, made clear his commitment to upholding the inter-faith harmony prevailing in The Gambia, including, as exemplified by the social integration of adherents of the Bahai faith. END COMMENT.

BANJUL 00000343 003.2 OF 003

STAFFORD